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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 002464

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PASS GUERNEY, LONDON AND NEARY, PARIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM SOCI XY NI
SUBJECT: CIVIL SOCIETY HOLDS RALLY AGAINST CHOGM AND OBASANJO

REF: (A) LAGOS 2363 (B) LAGOS 2330

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: The United Action for Democracy (UAD) held a rally in the Yaba district of Lagos on December 3 to protest President Obasanjo's policies and governance, as well as the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) taking place December 5-8 in Abuja. Mobile Police (MOPOL) arrested six persons, including UAD leader Bamidele Aturu, and reportedly beat several others. Journalists were allegedly assaulted; and one news agency had its equipment and film taken and its reporters were briefly detained. The protestors remain in custody at the State Criminal Investigation Department at Panti in Yaba. UAD attorneys have requested their release on bail and hoped to appear at their possible arraignment December ¶4. END SUMMARY.

THE YABA RALLY

¶2. (U) Press reports indicate that over 100 MOPOL, armed with batons and AK-47s, had assembled at 0400 on December 3 at the Yaba Bus Stop in anticipation of the rally held later that day. UAD demonstrators reportedly numbered 1,000 and were soon joined by a few thousand more street traders from the nearby Yaba market. After the rally reached Liberation Square in Yaba, UAD leader Aturu chastised Obasanjo for squandering the nation's wealth, pointing to the example of Obasanjo's importation of bulletproof Mercedes, reportedly worth 400 million USD, while the rest of Nigerians live in abject poverty. "Obasanjo believes the support of foreign governments will make him survive, but the Nigerian people will disgrace him before his masters," Aturu allegedly said referring to the CHOGM. During Aturu's speech in the square, MOPOL used tear gas to disperse the crowd and allegedly began beating demonstrators with batons and gun butts. MOPOL also assaulted a television crew from Minaj Broadcasting International, confiscated its equipment and film, and briefly detained the crew. Another one from Galaxy Television reported being beaten, but was able to keep its film footage. Human rights groups reported minor injuries among the protestors.

¶3. (U) In a December 3 press release, the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO) listed the following detainees, in addition to Aturu: Adebowale Balogun, President of the Yoruba Revolutionary Movement, Chairperson of the Yoruba Democratic Front, and a party leader of the National Conscience Party (NCP); Kamilu Mustapha of the Youth Democratic Front; Daga Tola and Joseph Anua of the Democratic Socialist Movement; and Joel Emerole of the Democratic Alternative. CLO claims that their detention is illegal and infringes on their constitutional rights of freedom of expression and assembly. The Nigerian Police assert that the protestors are being detained for not obtaining a permit for the rally. As of December 5, the detainees had yet to be arraigned.

TENSIONS LEADING UP TO THE RALLY

¶4. (U) The UAD, one of the lead organizations behind the November strike threat over fuel deregulation, has been agitating for the past several weeks and widely publicized its intended rally (ref A). The UAD asserts that in response to its vocal opposition of Obasanjo's

policies and its calls for his impeachment, the State Security Service (SSS) has been harassing the group. The CLO, which shares offices with UAD, reported that SSS personnel visited the UAD secretariat on November 28 and issued "threats of clampdown," intimidated UAD officials, and has been surveilling UAD members. Newspapers have also reported that the Director of the SSS has listed UAD as a "group perceived as a threat to national peace." Alluding to the December 2 release of the Human Rights Watch report alleging human rights abuses by the Obasanjo government -- including torture, intimidation, extra-judicial killings, and quelling of public dissent in the press and society at large - the CLO asserted that the violent dispersal of the rally and the activities of the SSS "are increasing evidence of the Obasanjo Government's attempts to stifle freedom of expression."

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: There is no doubt that there is much discontent among the populace. Abject poverty, endemic corruption, and the lack of accountability of the federal, state, and local governments are issues enflaming discontent. Civil Society has been vocalizing Nigerians' dissatisfaction with the Government more audibly ever since the July strikes over fuel deregulation. Although Obasanjo successfully prevented another strike over fuel deregulation in November that would have coincided with the All-Africa Games, Bamidele Aturu and his like-minded colleagues continue to carry the torch of civil disobedience and public outcry, no matter how dim the flame (ref B). Their apparent defeat in November may have impeded their efforts, but the rally seems to have motivated Civil Society to continue agitating against the GON. Nevertheless it has not yet generated broad support amongst the body politic. END COMMENT.

HINSON-JONES